

**Part II**

Keynote Speech from the Media Alliance Annual Conference - by Tony Conrad

**PARADOX AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA:  
Marketing Social Criticism,  
Institutionalizing Artistic Independence,  
(Dis) Organizing for Alienation<sup>1</sup>**

**I. ALTERNATIVE MEDIA--WHAT IS IT?**

As an organizational initiative within a largely inactive larger population, it stands for an imperative; namely: "Do what YOU want to do." I believe it was Gregory Bateson who was the first to suggest how this imperative, "Do what YOU want to do," is a paradoxical demand; to fulfill the demand is to do what I have told you to do.

Regional organization faces just exactly this same problem; but the paradox is made explicit by the conventions which sustain organizations in our legal system. If people can be convinced to organize, to "Do what THEY want to do," they shortly find that "their" organization implicates them in a need for a Board of Directors, a Staff, a Budget, Funding and Hours, and presently the organization has become a service organization, operating according to its dynamics, to offer the original community its version of "their" wants.

The effectiveness and cohesiveness of these human service networks is clearly indicated by the study, "Arts: The Economic Impact in New York State," a Preliminary Report by the Alliance of New York State Arts Councils [undated--but 1986]:

The arts are a unique industry...we are looking at a total human work force of over 18,000 individuals, both paid (32%) and volunteer (68%). Of paid employees, 11% are full time and 89% are part time or contracted employees...The cost effectiveness of such a situation cannot be underestimated. A very small number of salaried individuals are mobilizing and directing a comparatively large group of workers and doing so on a very modest fee...<sup>2</sup>

...though Salaries and Benefits make up 47% of the total expenditures. The royalties driving this system are so exploitative and high that in the face of cutbacks 77% of respondents "would avoid reducing staff," which "particularly in the upstate test sites would force organizations to go out of business."<sup>3</sup>

Now where people resist these extremely tenacious structural bonds, independent media communities die, unless they can be differently structured, on a more modular or virus-like model--in which cable access, or tape rentals, afford simple and direct feedback sampling mechanisms directly from and to the community itself. These "communities" will then have opportunities to explore themselves, make mistakes, and reinvent the wheel.

There is a Japanese dumptruck in the sky over America, and it has begun to unload itself everywhere: after eighty-eight one-way-media years, the tools of production for media are being radically redistributed by the consumer equipment industry.

The camcorder dump is different from the home movie revolution; once the equipment is there, recording video is cheap. What is about to happen? And how do we--the independent producers and media service organizations that already populate this landscape--how can or should we respond?

Are we ready for leadership, or to be buried? Our personal and collective histories, and our effectiveness as institutions, hang in the balance before the onrushing tidal wave of home production--still leaderless, and still STILL.

What is the position of **INDEPENDENT video producers** with respect to the mass of new equipment owners? Perhaps they (or rather we) represent an elite;--on the other hand, perhaps we are not so elitist at heart, and would like to "educate" the public to our work.

A hundred years ago the real cost of becoming an amateur photographer was closely parallel to amateur video costs today. As Dona B. Schwartz and Michael Griffin point out in an unusually instructive study, "Amateur Photography: The Organizational Maintenance of an Aesthetic Code," "Alfred Stieglitz's leadership in the first decade of the century was definitive in the profile of non-commercial photography; he "publicised and elevated the work of an elite, leading to a hierarchical arrangement of non-commercial photographic activity."<sup>5</sup> The boundary represented by a need to "educate" an audience is a familiar emblem for the distance which an elite articulates between itself and its reference population--the hoi polloi.

That video art perceives itself as requiring the education of its potential viewers already defines its failure to be commonly regarded as other than an elite. In this case, the established canon of video art is in peril of being swept away



by another and more populist esthetic or ethos, whose direction may profitably be diverted in the interests of powerful industrial forces. "From the beginning, the photographic industry established a close relationship with organized amateur associations, because camera club photographers constituted an important market for products."<sup>6</sup>

Is this what will happen with video? I will suggest that this will not be the case, for two crucial reasons, and that there is still opportunity to engage and offer leadership for an active and productive decentralized amateur video community.

First, there are real conflicts between the aims and structures of the video equipment industry and the entertainment industry, so that industry itself is still unresolved as to what suitable objectives, practices, and standards might be for amateur video production.

Second, the relationship between commercial and non-commercial media is not so cozy as it is in photography: "...industry, commercial, and amateur interrelations [in photography] constitute what [R. A.] Stebbins has called a 'professional amateur public system,' a system of amateurs and professionals tied together by common standards and goals, similar patterns of production and audience appreciation." This homogeneity will not be possible in video, where the costs of commercial production go far beyond the costs of basic tools.

The fundamental problem of the independent producer is always the same one: how to simplify production. This problem springs from that inherent appetite of human vision, for detail and complexity. Painters were the first to grasp this problem, by dwelling upon detail. The major crisis which photography represented, for painting, can be reduced to the fact that photography embodied technologically a simple mechanism for rendering vast amounts of detail.<sup>8</sup> The concomitant (and complementary) problem for photography, and one which the media have inherited, is how to organize, structure, plan, and control the wealth of detail that the lens provides--and it does provide it, autonomously, ready or not, the instant the recording process begins.

Historically, the various approaches to filmmaking have also represented different approaches to the problem of organizing detail. The dominant narrative cinema has achieved a solution in bridging the budgetary requirements represented by the lens's appetite for detail with mass spectacle. Against the background of this practice, independent producers have succeeded

precisely as they have been able to evolve alternative principles for the unification of photographic detail in their work. Documentary media for example have resolved the problem in the authenticating function of uncontrolled (or uncontrollable) detail itself; this detail guarantees the specificity of the scenes portrayed. Animators explore the almost erotic distance between simplification and authenticating detail. Many "art" media makers use their modification of the photographic image as a gesture of control, or they rely upon other approaches which were initially explored by painters and sculptors. For instance, the minimalist touchstone that "less is more" provided an esthetic ground for the appearance of structural film. "Less is more" diverts the film or video maker from the production obligations of the narrative spectacle, and brings the budget within reach of an individual. Chantal Ackerman's Jeanne Dielmann is an excellent example.

Now a new tool is revising estimations of our ability to control detail once again. As computers, and devices incorporating embedded computers (like editing controllers, for example) gain rapidly in power and flexibility, there is new reason to investigate higher-level integrative principles for handling detail. Simply, this is the way that computers most naturally and efficaciously handle their duties. In a current issue of Scientific American it says, Applications involving the rapid movement of visual images will be feasible...Because of improvements in semiconductor technology and in screen resolution, users of...computer facilities will be able to work with high quality, fast displays that are reasonably priced. The displays will be capable of showing vivid, highly detailed images depicting the results of complex simulations and modeling. It will be possible to interact with the display...<sup>9</sup>

**AN AFTERWORD TO PART ONE, on appropriation;** from a review of Handsworth Songs by Judith Williamson:<sup>10</sup>

'There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories.' This line from the extraordinarily poetic script of Handsworth Songs is at the heart not only of the film's meaning, but of its structure; or rather--and this is true of all successful films--the two are inseparable...the film makes no simple distinction between the 'superficial' and the 'real'; its images are very much felt as such--from archive footage of colonial labour to the TV picture of Thatcher's 'alien customs' speech--and



on one level it is about the images it's made of... It is in the tension between image and story that the film really pushes the boundaries of documentary.<sup>11</sup>

## II. WHAT SPARKS A "COUNTER CULTURE"?

Let's be fatalistic, and accept the general premise that each of us is entrenched at a social locus which is delimited for us by the larger social structures about us; moreso, that each of us is as we are determined by a pervasively engulfing socio-economic order. A counterculture appears to be a herniation of opposing societal forces that have shaped a role for which the socio-cultural hegemony has determined no locus. The counterculture carries the conflicting forces with(in) it as its defining ideology.

A counterculture will define itself, from within, through its engagement with those forces by which it has been engendered; from the outside, it may function in an entirely different capacity. For instance, the 1960's youth counterculture provided a training ground for domestic surveillance agencies, whose experience was subsequently applied directly to third world police and media tactics.

Just as individuals may be led, paid off, or controlled, so a counterculture may be manipulated, co-opted, or even neutralized. In the latter instance, the survivors either carry their oppositional posture with them into isolation, or their own feelings are finally adjusted to accommodate (and enrich) the mainstream culture. If the mainstream defines a suitable social role and a regulable funding structure for the counterculture, its members will be likely to flow back into the mainstream rather than run life's rapids, when the going gets rough.

Two simplified models for a counterculture emerge, then. In one, there is a set of oppositions that radically excludes the counterculture from the mainstream; the counterculture represents a catastrophic change of paradigm (to borrow from Thom and Kuhn). In the other, the counterculture functions more as a specialization--a fashionable preoccupation which momentarily sustains the vitality of the larger mainstream. The real world lies between these extremes, catastrophe and fashion--which are inextricably interwoven.

In a recent Buffalo News article, I found an opportunity to describe the independent media community there, in such a way as to emphasize

its value to the city mainstream. The article, "What's New with the Avant-Garde?"<sup>12</sup> ran in the Sunday supplement, with my picture on the cover. The article actually pleased me considerably; it was earnest and effective. However, an editorial elsewhere in the issue complains:

We had this vague idea that we might get a nice story about some bizarre people living interesting countercultural lives. At the very least, we were certain we'd get great pictures of people who looked, well, freaky.

So what happens? We get Tony Conrad, the man on the cover. Now, I've personally got nothing against the guy. He is into a modern art form, video. His credentials in the world of underground filmmaking go way back.

But look at him. This is the avant-garde?

And it's not just Conrad. The other avant-garde people in our story look the same: normal, middle-class, respectable even...

Surely we can do better than this. Out go another reporter and another photographer...This time the assignment can't miss: Tell us about the punks.

Maybe it's a cheap ploy, but we've got them-- spiked hair and all--on Page 14.<sup>13</sup> A more far-reaching (though no less personally affecting) example is the New York State Council on the Arts.

NYSCA can be seen as a liberal Republican response to the social unrest of the 1960's. This version of NYSCA is one which many of us can accept, though we may find it disquieting to do so. In any event, surely NYSCA is an armature of the New York mainstream, and surely, too, there are groups supported through NYSCA whose ideological alignment is countercultural. The question of who or what is an agent of fashion, or of catastrophe, in this scenario, is far less important than another and more central question: What balance of forces has depleted the countercultural impulse within the media community, over the last twenty years?

The pendulum of attitudes toward alternative social standards seems to swing across decades, or generations; meanwhile, it seems unaffected by many geographic and cultural boundaries. Fujiko Nakaya, who coordinated the Japan 87 Video Television Festival in Tokyo last summer, told me that when she had difficulties obtaining corporate sponsorship for the Festival, she took advantage of her numerous social connections to go to the



top, over the heads of the officers she had approached initially. With the higher-ups' approval, everything abruptly became easy. Ten years ago, Fujiko Nakaya said, the people at the top and the people at the bottom each had their own province of authority, and those lower down didn't jump at the whims of the top brass. Now there is a new generation, younger people who see their only route to fulfillment through the corporations. They resent the failures of the last generation, with its independent, alternative attitude toward life. In Japan today, the junior management level is ultra-compliant.

Suppose we see the pendulum swinging again. Suppose we feel that alternatives are valuable, the more and starker the better. Suppose we feel that the independent media are to be valued not as a stepping stone up to the industry, but as a catastrophic alternative. Suppose we are disappointed that alternatives in general have so small a toehold within our late-80's social order. Suppose we would like to give the pendulum a push. Suppose we would like a little more excitement around here, for a change. Suppose we can recognize that an alternative viewpoint is different at its foundations from a mainstreaming viewpoint, and that a countercultural media would need to tie in to some very broad swings in the temperament of people all over the country.

Without control over funding channels, we are left with only ideas to throw into the swing of things; ideas and identities.

### III. WHAT SORT OF COMMODITY IS A VCR?

Advertising, today, whether it sells cars as dream machines for country jaunts or "natural" cereals as a means for transcending the admitted evils of chemically fortified supermarket fare, maintains the same logic—the sense that a product contains the negation of its own corporate origins.<sup>14</sup>

This quotation from Stuart Ewen's Captains of Consciousness should not suggest his indifference to ideology. In the 1950's, he points out to us,

[t]he definitions of "freedom" and "choice" were being unified and firmly implanted in the conception of loyal commitment to the political, religious and social arenas encrusted by brand names and consumer credit. Once again, the definition proffered by a "freedom-loving" political ideology was one in which to produce one's own world was subversive (except where it was legitimized by the "do-it-yourself" industry); to assert the idea that a community

might control its own destiny was "communitistic."<sup>15</sup>

The "do-it-yourself" industry is fascinating in its relation to the home video industry, I feel.

What would the process of change in the direction of a decentralized independent media culture entail?

For more than twenty years, the idea of a populist media has been a theme among poets and social speculators. Back in 1970, Beryl Korot and Phyllis Gershuny editorialized in Radical Software,<sup>16</sup> "Soon, accessible VTR systems and video cassettes (even before CATV opens up) will make alternate networks a reality." The conservatism of the government/industry media coalition has kept progress in this direction to a crawl; how unbelievably little has been accomplished in seventeen years! By keeping the lid on, the industry has prevented the conceptual development of decentralized media; the unspoken but omnipresent presupposition has stalled at, "Boy! If they would only give us a network, we'd move into the future so fast they wouldn't know if we were goin' or comin'."

Almost every approach to "understanding television" stumbles and falls at the feet of the medium's inescapably seductive presence—Who can resist analysing television as what the audience sees on TV? Yet it is obvious that film and television are (and have been) businesses first, and that the shows and audiences come second. As Sol Worth and Jay Ruby say, the appropriate unit of analysis is not the product but "the context—the community and the community members' interaction with visual-symbolic events."<sup>17</sup> And as they say in Hollywood, it's not called "show art".

In fact, the business end is very much on the move today, however moribund these industries appear in terms of their products. "One reason for this is the country's shift from a manufacturing to a service- and information-centered economy. The film, television, and communications businesses, along with the financial services industry, are at the leading edge. They require a rare blend of business skills and creative instincts...The brightest, sharpest people are attracted to the arena which offers the best level of play." Such are the views of Harvard M.B.A. Copey Coppedge, a financier specializing in media investments. Another Hollywood Harvard M.B.A. says "Now, you meet Harvard M.B.A.'s all over the industry."<sup>18</sup> If people ask whether you like TV, they need to



be answered much as you would whether you like real estate, or mutual funds.

In Peter D'Agostino's otherwise quite laudable book, Transmission: Theory and Practice for a New Television Aesthetics,<sup>19</sup> the only discussion of television as other than a source of viewers' programs is in John Carey and Pat Quarles' "Interactive Television", an account of community-based interactive television in Reading, PA.<sup>20</sup> Even in Deirdre Boyle's, "Guerrilla Television,"<sup>21</sup> on the early collective-oriented "alternative media," individual artist hagiographies dominate the discussion—though the larger story remains, in the end:

Once the possibility of reaching a mass audience opened up, the very nature of guerrilla television changed. No longer out to create an alternative to television, guerrilla TV was competing on the same airwaves for viewers and sponsors...Although some continued making television their own way, pioneering what has since become the world of low power TV and the terrain of public access cable, many others yearned to see their work reach a wider audience. Without anyone's noticing it, the rough vitality of guerrilla TV's early days was shed for a slicker, TV look.<sup>22</sup>

This is not the place to recapitulate these many epic tales from video history:

- the promise of cable
- the coopting of radical television by the TV industry
- the industry resistance to public access
- the use of alternative technological systems by artists
- the problems and successes of independent documentarians
- the acceptance of TV by artists

Here, the question is: why has the balance of this whole story been subverted? Alternative media have disappeared in the undertow of television, so that today's general audience is functionally unaware of any alternative to TV, with the possible exception of "Live from Off Center"'s roster of "artists." These people's work doesn't look like you could have done it at home, even though many of the makers represented built their reputations on works that were made in extremely limiting circumstances, on miniscule budgets. "Live from off Center" conceals this ontogenic essential, and in consequence offers us "stars." "Stars" are persons without histories or other points of reference, except in their isolation and distance; living allegories. Of itself, there is nothing wrong with wanting to be like a "star,"

that is their potential redemptive value. On the other hand, when the traces of their development have been smudged over, a "star" presents no fully emulatable persona; they are not who they seem to be. All of the problems associated with "stars" have to do with this.

As the social order shapes us to its purposes, we develop and internalize sets of behavioral ideals, of reference images, with respect to which we position ourselves and pilot a course among life's opportunities and obstacles. This morality may assume different guises: a person, a procedure, a code.

If we are interested in fostering alternatives, we will need to look for a displacement of moral references. The persona which acts as a moral referent is always derived from the psychological parent; the state always tries to be in the father position. The Nazi propaganda film Hitlerjunge Quex, with a brilliant analysis by Gregory Bateson, is available at the Museum of Modern Art. Bateson shows how the propagandists attempted the conversion of the viewer to Nazism by manipulating their identification of the Nazi Party with reference to the normally understood roles of the parents in the German family at that time.

Moral leadership may be embodied effectively in a particular real or imaginary person. The more remote this person, the less chance there will be for disappointment; hence the effectiveness of martyrs, and of stars.

Moral reference to a procedure, such as a ceremony, oracular consultation, or meditation, may be more convenient to manipulate or change than moral commitment to a person. However, the third alternative, a moral code, is far stronger in our literate society, which is ruled by law.

There are surely codes of conduct (such as not vomiting on people, say) which don't need to be part of the law. However, the law subtexts so broad an arc within the landscape of moral precept that we may almost begin looking for alternative cultural positions by going, from the very first, outside of the law.

In a recent issue of The Squealer,<sup>23</sup> a set of pseudonymous confessions recounts "the Thief Stories," the early (and perhaps boastful, or fictional, but at least confessional) transgressive adventures, of the various author artists. As the editor mentions, "People who show an early propensity to steal may be those more willing to challenge the status quo later in life."

Is it necessary to break the law in order to establish cultural alternatives? --No, but if this is a problem, you are already on the wrong track. Is



it too late to start breaking the law, if you have grown up a law-abider? --It may take special effort; it may take special understanding. How frequently do you need to break the law, for it to be broken? --This is a matter of subjective judgement. Most photographs of Jean Genet or of William Burroughs manage to catch them hors de combat, whereas stars without the benefit of lawbreaking, like Rambo or Jesus, may need to be iconised at their moment of excess.

Moral corruption has a long and distinctive history in the media. Perhaps that is why we may tend to think of moral alternatives in terms of scandal. Cultural alternatives may thrive on scandal, but they do not need to depend upon it. It would be perversely to my liking to put forward the idea that NYSCA merge its artists' support activities into the State's correctional programs. However, the alternative attitude doesn't require habitual lawbreaking, or even serious criminal activity. More importantly, the alternative attitude does not require getting caught.

It is the particular moral attitude with which we must be concerned foremost; and this alternative attitude need not be associated with a morally corrupt posture. To the contrary, a morally superior position is frequently most effective in propagating moral alternatives; much of the social activism of the documentary movement is focused on moral superiority. One of the most effective media forces to emerge in recent times is Christian TV, whose viability is precisely that of a moral alternative. The interest in daring coded statements made by filmmakers in confined environments, like Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible or Tarkowski's Andrej Rublev, is an interest that is infectious because of its moral "superiority."

In everything that is offered to the consumer who buys a camcorder, there is no tissue of a suggestion that making a videotape is anything other than a completely morally neutral activity. First of all, the core concept of home equipment ownership is the home movie tradition, with its implicit privateness, pompous historicity, and stolid rectitude. Second, the implicit promise that an amateur videographer might start making movies--movies with murders, torture, and crime--is a promise that is broken by the weight of production costs. Should the amateur access this terrain anyhow, their impact is bantamweight: Hollywood has done it worse (or "better"), and has relabeled such evil as acceptable entertainment, much as eating the corpse of a cow or pig is acceptable.

There is one conspicuous exception; my guess is that every independent producer has been suspected, by the average person in the street, of making pornography. Enough has been said about, and done with, this model for alternative culturality. Isn't there any other model which the mass of people could identify with, respond to, and in terms of which the independent producer community could express and represent leadership?

The corporate, board-dominated and community-service-oriented institutional structure which public funding requires is almost essentially incompatible with extra-legal initiatives.

Instead of impotent and fitful gestures to service and educate "the community," the need is really:

1. To find creative engagements with the law, to set instrumental moral examples for the new home camcorder user.

And: 2. To invent new crimes.

## NOTES

1. Keynote Address, Media Alliance Conference, October 16, 1987. Manhattan Community College, New York. Transcription of tape recorded by Barbara Lattanzi. Omitted here is Part IV, which included the discussion and examples (from William Burroughs and Brian Springer).
2. Alliance of New York State Arts Councils, "Arts: The Economic Impact in New York State, a Preliminary Report." Undated [1986]. P. 4.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
4. In Lindlof, Thomas R., ed. Natural Audiences: Qualitative Research of Media Uses and Effects. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing, 1987. Pp. 198-224.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 215. The reference is to Stebbins, R. A. Amateurs: On the Margin Between Work and Leisure. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1979.
8. In a recent article on scientific authentication technologies for art works, we find the somewhat snide assessment that "[m]odern art is particularly easy to fake because forgers need not mimic the effects of aging. Moreover, as Eugenia Ordenez of the Museum of Modern Art in New York says, 'modern art is not always technically challenging.'" (Horgan, John. "But Is It Art?" Scientific American, October 1987. P. 51). The technological simplifications characteristic of much contemporary art have usually been attributed to the exigencies of the art market, rather than to inherent processes within art's modernist developmental context.



Yet an extraordinary range of modernist developments (abstraction, cubism, pop art, appropriation, photorealism, conceptual art, etc.) are directly derivative from one question: How is a work to be conceived so as not to rely upon a neediness for detail?

9. Peled, Abraham. "The Next Computer Revolution." Scientific American 257/4, October 1987. P. 59, 62.

10. The Black Audio Film Collective's Handsworth Songs (1986) had been shown the evening before at the Conference.

11. Williamson, Judith. "To Haunt Us." New Statesman 113/2911, January 9, 1987.

12. Anderson, Dale. "What's New with the Avant-Garde?" Buffalo Magazine of the Buffalo News, August 2, 1987. P. 6.

13. Herko, Carl. "Something Old, Something New." Buffalo Magazine of the Buffalo News, August 2, 1987. P. 4, emphasis in original.

14. Ewen, Stuart. Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977. P. 199.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

16. Summer 1970, unpaginated, emphasis in original.

17. Worth, Sol, and Jay Ruby. "The American Community's Socialization to Pictures: An Ethnography of Visual Communication (A Preproposal)." In S. Worth, Studying Visual Communication. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1981. Pp. 200-203. Also as cited in D. B. Schwartz and M. Griffin, op. cit., p. 199, emphasis in original.

18. Tom McGrath, Senior vice-president for acquisitions, planning, and development, Act III Communications. Both quotes from Craig Lambert, "The Harvard Powers of Hollywood." Harvard Magazine, Sept-Oct 1987. Pp. 41-59.

19. D'Agostino, Peter, ed. Transmission. New York: Tanam Press, 1985. Pp. 105-17.

20. Vincent Mosco's "What Is Videotex?," pp. 119-38, concerns text, not images. The computer bulletin board, of which Videotex is in a sense the corporate/national incarnation, is not treated.

21. Op. cit., Pp. 203-13.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

23. Buffalo: Squeaky Wheel Media Coalition, September 1987. Pp. 5,6,8,9.

## MEDIA ALLIANCE

The Media Alliance is a professional association for the electronic media arts field in New York State. Our members are media art centers, museums, libraries, educational institutions, cable access centers, and foundations, as well as the independent producers who create audio and video art and documentary tapes.

We work to: enhance the production resources available to independent producers and arts organizations; facilitate exhibition opportunities; stimulate new sources of financial and technical support for media arts activities; provide marketing and management training to our members; provide a forum for the exchange of information and ideas pertaining to media arts; and represent the field in statewide arts advocacy activities.

The Media Alliance is supported in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and the New York State Department of Education. Additional support is provided by Channel Four, Con Edison, Media Bureau at the Kitchen, Morgan Guaranty Trust, Mobil Foundation, NBC, The New York Council on the Humanities, Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, and WNET/13.

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